

47 - Rules

John 8:19-24

It's getting confusing: Many Christians seem headed in opposite directions. One group is becoming more and more legalistic, pointing to all the rules in the Old Testament and insisting that they are eternal which means they must be obeyed forever. Another group is becoming more and more lawless, pointing to the fact that when Jesus died for our sins He died for all of them, so it doesn't matter if a believer continues to sin. They say everything is under grace. Both groups quote from the Bible to support their positions, but they say very different things and present a very different picture of God. One group is rediscovering the "Law." The other is abandoning it altogether.

So who's right, and who's wrong? And what if both are wrong, then how would we discover the right way? Are we supposed to obey all those rules or not? And the most important question of all is, how will we know for sure that we're right? Thankfully there is an answer, a rock-solid answer. And it's not an answer that comes from someone's opinion or a clever argument. It's an answer that comes from God Himself. But He doesn't tell us this answer; He shows us the answer. He lets us watch as He applies His own rules to someone who has broken the rules. And what we discover is that He is neither legalistic nor lawless. He's exactly like Jesus.

Seeing the Father (vs19-24)
• DBS (Sun, Mon, Fri, Sat)

Rules

The Bible is full of rules, things God commanded us to do and things He commanded us to not do. Someone counted and said there are 613 of these rules in the first five books of the Bible alone: rules about daily life; how to perform religious ceremonies; how to conduct civil government; how to manage business matters; and how to prosecute criminal activities. As you read through these rules you soon discover they're not the sort of rules that humans make up on their own. Anyone who observes these rules ends up living life very differently from those who don't.

At their root, God's rules are designed to teach us how to love: how to love Him and how to love each other, and each rule has been given to us as an expression of His love for us. He's calling us upward to become like Him. Peter said, "Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1Pe 1:15-16).

Some of the rules are stern, and some have punishments that are severe, even calling for death. But as we'll learn today, God didn't give them to us to hurt us but to bring us back to Him. His goal is to correct us, not destroy us. How do we know that? It's right here in front of us in John chapter 8. The God who wrote the rules is showing us how to apply His rules. Jesus said, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also" (v19). He's telling us to watch Him, because He's doing exactly what the Father would do.

What did He do? (Jn 8:3-11)

When a woman who was indisputably guilty of breaking a very important rule was placed in front of Jesus, her accusers asked Him for a verdict. The first thing we have to observe is what He did not do: He didn't enforce the rules. Instead He used the rules to show her her need of grace.

Now, the Law of Moses does command that a person who did what she did should die. So you would think that the God who wrote that rule would want His rule carried out. But He didn't. He didn't want a dead woman; He wanted a repentant heart. He didn't want a convicted criminal; He wanted her back.

The clash between Jesus and the Pharisees was a clash between these two views. They saw the Law of Moses as a standard which must be met, or God would be angry. Jesus saw the Law as a tool to drive desperate people back to God. Paul said it this way: "The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith" (Gal 3:24).

In the introduction to this gospel John said:

"For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized (came into being) through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17).

Moses was a great man. Through him God gave us a wonderful gift: the first five books of the Bible (Torah; "the Law") in which God reveals many aspects of His will. But through Jesus Christ, grace and truth were not only shown to be essential elements of God's character, through Jesus grace and truth actually "came into being." In other words, Jesus not only showed them to us; He made them available to us. But we must not think God showed no mercy before Jesus arrived.

A merciful God

God has always been a merciful God who didn't want to judge people, but longed for them to repent and return to Him. The entire Old Testament is full of examples of people who disobeyed God, deserved punishment, even death, but were given grace. That's because God's essential nature is love. But if people forget that fact and forget that He is a Savior, and take those rules at face value, the result is that they end up fearfully trying to keep each rule, so God won't become angry, and demanding everyone else do the same.



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Think about it: Cain murdered his brother Abel, but instead of ordering him to be executed, God gave him a sign to protect him (Ge 4:15); or the nation of Israel worshipping a golden calf shortly after swearing to be loyal to God, and calling down curses on themselves if they disobeyed (Ex 32:1-15). Yet God didn't curse them. He didn't even leave them; He continued leading them to the promised land. Where's the justice in that? What happened to the rules? Ezra captures this mercy of God in his great prayer (Ne 9:9-21; 26-31). He replays for the nation their entire history and shows them how many times they deserved total destruction, yet God kept giving them mercy. In other words, God didn't follow His own rules! So when Jesus does what He does, gives mercy to a guilty woman, He isn't inventing some new interpretation of the Law. He's reminding the Pharisees of how their God has always treated His people; He's reminding them that their God is merciful.

What didn't He do?

As we've seen, when a guilty woman was placed in front of Jesus for judgment, He didn't enforce the rules. But He didn't change the rules either. He left God's moral code firmly in place and warned her to bring her lifestyle up to God's standards. After all her accusers had left, He said, "And I don't condemn you either. Go, from now [on], sin no more" (v11) (literal). He said the same sort of thing to a man He healed by the Pool of Bethesda. He said, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you" (Jn 5:14). In the Sermon on the Mount He said this:

"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:17-19).

We learn from things He taught later, and from His apostles, that what He meant by keeping even "the least of these commandments" were the moral teachings of the Law, not all the religious rules because He fulfilled all those religious requirements for us. Those have passed away, unless a person wishes to use them as a way to teach the Bible or express worship (Mt 12:1-8; Mk 7:14-19; Ro 14:4-6; Col 2:16-17). So grace is not an excuse to keep on sinning; it's the opportunity to keep on trying, until we learn how to obey.

What does He want us to do?

The same thing: receive grace and recommit to the standard; give grace and help people reach the standard. We're not to ignore the standard or change the standard, but neither are we to use the standard harshly. We must always hope that a person will repent, not that they be given the justice they deserve. Here are some guidelines to help us understand how we should and should not use God's rules:

- We should let His rules convict us of sin and drive us to repentance and grace.
- We should not use them to try to earn our salvation or gain favor with God.
- We should let God's rules teach us how to live godly lives. Paul said:
"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2Ti 3:16).
- We should not use those rules to condemn people but always seek to bring them back to God.
- We should let God's rules reveal His heart and character. He's very different from us, and His rules teach us about those differences.
- We should see His rules as a gift of His love, calling His children upward to become like Him.

How can we be sure of this? Because we just watched Jesus apply those rules, and if we know Him, we know the Father also.

Questions

- 1) Can you think of a time when God gave you mercy rather than the justice you deserved? Would you be willing to tell us about it?
- 2) Can you define the word "legalism"? How would you explain it to a child?
- 3) Can you define the word "lawlessness"? How would you explain it to a child?
- 4) What would Jesus say to someone who is legalistic? What would He say to someone who is lawless?